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HOMEWARD BOUND
and Other Stories

Gillian Ybabez

1. Homeward Bound

The woman drives on back roads through the night. The only light comes from the headlights of the car. It's a good car but old. Long flat lines, a solid frame, and power steering. Not a classic by any standard but it suits her needs. At the crossroads, she stops to check her map and notes. The paper map has been unfolded and refolded so many times it doesn't remember how to lay flat. She unfolds a section and then another and a third before finding the crossroads. So far from where she thought she was and farther still from where she wants to be.

The classic rock from the radio ends and local news begins. The radio like the car is from an earlier era. No digital tuning or LCD displays, not even a cassette deck. Just two knobs and a row of mechanical preset buttons. She hears a name, Mr. Prescott. She knew a Mr. Prescott when she was younger. Could it be the same Mr. Prescott? A city name is mentioned. She makes a note and checks her map. It's not far. The leads she gets are never far.

She just wants to go home but it alludes her. After high school, she left the small town she grew up in and hasn't been back. Now she can't seem to find her way there. The roads seem to twist and turn away from where she wants to go. Every turn she makes is the wrong one.

She turns left at the crossroads and the radio signal grows weak. She presses the preset buttons until a new station comes through clearly. Country music fills several hours of driving until another local news broadcast breaks in. Another name: Mrs. Garcia. Did she know a Mrs. Garcia? Was she the old lady on the corner? She mowed her lawn in the summers for ten

dollars. The news ended with a bumper ad for the station. She makes a note of the town's name.

The sky lightens and the back road blends into a two lane highway. She slows as she enters a town and cuts off the radio. The gas stations, the fast food restaurants, the local diner, the motel, and the signs to historic downtown. It all looks familiar but not quite right. A lot could have changed in the years since she had left, so she will take the day to drive downtown and around a few blocks. This isn't home, she feels, but she has to check.

In the evening, she will drive out of town and turn onto a back road. She will turn on the radio and listen for something to lead her home.

2. Body Renewal

I gazed into the suspension tube. A young woman with a familial resemblance floated within. The sister my own sister had never accepted me as.

"We followed your requests for a true clone only altering the hormonal balance after puberty had started. If you don't mind me asking, why not get a full conversion?" the body renewal attendant asked.

"This how I want my body to be," I told the young woman.

"That's fully within your rights but most," she paused as she stumbled unto the next word, "women of your type prefer full conversions."

"Trans women you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm older than most women or girls who go through this. That's the problem; I'm getting too old. The cost for my medications and treatments and therapies are going up every year. My insurance company did a cost analysis and decided it is cheaper for me to go through a body renewal than to keep maintaining my original body. I would never have chosen this for myself."

"Why not? It's a second chance at life. With a x-chromosome duplication you can have children, a family-"

"A normal life?" I interrupted her.

"I didn't mean..."

"No, you didn't but it's an indication of the society we live in. Even after all these years, we are still outsiders. That's why I gave in and accepted this but on my terms. When I was a teenager, this technology was science fiction. Now anyone with enough money or the right insurance coverage can get a new body. Eighty years of scientific advancement and they have never stopped hating us."

"Surely it's gotten better?"

"Tiny steps. Society advances and regresses like waves on the beach." I gazed once more at the young woman floating in the chamber. "Maybe in my next life I'll see some real change."

3. Ghostly Defense

The world watched live on tv as alien ships hovered over every major city on earth. I never thought I would live to see our hopes and fears about extraterrestrial life play out on CNN. To be accurate I hadn't lived to see it.

I had died in my sleep years before but it hadn't been peaceful. My killer stabbed me twenty-three times but the first three would have been enough. The violence, my pain, my fear, my suffering bound my spirit to earth. At least I think that's how it happened. Maybe I'm just a remnant, a torn scrap of a soul. Existence is weird after you die.

Time moves differently. Sometimes days blurred by; other times a night lasted forever. Then there was moving around. I could effortlessly pass through all walls, ceilings, and floors. Except I couldn't leave my home. The outside walls were simply impenetrable to me. And worst of all, I had no body. I mean, I was a ghost so of course I didn't have a body but I also didn't have, like, a ghost body I could see or feel. Eventually, I learned to "walk" like I had feet and "grab" things like I had hands. After a while, I fully grounded myself and settled down to quietly haunt my house.

When I was alive, I didn't care who might live in my house after I was gone. I hadn't expected to be around to care. Turns out I did care. I drove out several new owners for various reasons. My methods were classic haunting. I opened cabinet doors. I stomped in the hallways at night. I rattled doorknobs. I moved small items. Once I managed to break a window. It was never earth-shattering scary but if done randomly and often enough, anyone will give in. If I had to "live" with these

people, then I needed to like them.

Finally, a nice lesbian couple, Lou and Betty, moved in after buying at a discount because of my haunting. They burned incense and left small food offerings, neither of which I could truly enjoy but the gesture was nice. Better than the previous owners who tried to have me exorcised. I stopped being a problem ghost and "lived" in peace with them. They didn't know my name but knew I had been a woman so they called me Jane.

Years passed. Betty went back to school, meanwhile, Lou wrote a book but never finished the sequel. They had two kids, Diane and then Henry a couple of years later, and a parade of cats who mostly ignored me. The main exception was Miss Whiskers, an older rescue, who hissed near constantly at my presence. After a couple of years, she only hissed when I entered a room.

Through it all they never forgot me. The incense burning and food offerings dwindled and stopped but I didn't mind. They were nice people and often tried to include me in discussions. "Do you think Jane would like to watch a comedy or action movie tonight?" Most times I didn't answer. It felt voyeuristic to be an unseen and unheard presence except by knocking on a wall. I did occasionally put on a mild show when their skeptical friends would visit.

When they brought Diane home for the first time, Lou stopped just inside the front door and introduced me to her. I gently held her hand and she tried to squeeze back. At night, I watched over her and as she started to crawl and walk I guarded her steps. Henry was much the same. I fretted all day when Diane began preschool causing the wind chimes hung in the

living room to sound randomly. Betty thought it was funny that I seemed more active when the kids were out of the house. I couldn't guide them away from sharp corners or steady them when they tripped when they were out of the house.

In my death, I had found a family. Then they appeared. Silent massive hovering alien ships. I watched the news from behind the couch as Lou, Betty, and the kids huddled together. We hoped they came in peace but when the pods began to drop that hope died. Alien controlled machines began terrorizing cities around the world.

Nearby, I heard and felt an explosion rumble through the house. They were coming and there was nothing I could do to protect my family. I became erratic; pacing through the walls, flying from floor to floor, causing doors to bang open and closed. I only stopped, when I heard Betty yelling, "Jane stop it! You're scaring the children!" I froze in the kitchen. From outside I could hear more explosions and people yelling. Then the front of the house tore open. One of the alien machines stood staring in through the hole it had made. It raised what I could only guess was a weapon and took aim.

Time slowed as I launched myself at the machine not caring that I could do nothing. As I approached, I felt heat coming from the machine. It grew in intensity until I felt like I was burning but I continued toward it. I grabbed at the weapon and electricity lit up every nerve in my non-existent body. The weapon sagged and the machine staggered back with twitchy uneven movements. I followed it out on to the lawn and reached into the body of the machine. Again electricity surged painfully through me but what was that going to do, kill me? I pressed forward to the hottest part of the machine. A horrible

screeching sound came from inside the alien machine and then it collapsed to the ground.

My amazement at my apparent victory was cut short by Diane yelling, "Are you a superhero?!" I turned to see all four of my adopted family staring at me.

"You can see me?" I asked. I glanced down seeing my body for the first time in years.

"Yeah, we can see you. Who are you?" Lou asked.

"I'm … I'm Jane the ghost," I said opting for the name they would know.

"You're our ghost!" Diane shouted. She broke into a run towards me and passed right through me. I reached back, grabbed the back of her shirt, and pulled her back inside the house. A hand passed through me followed by a squeak from Betty.

"You really are a ghost," she said. "What did you do to it?"

"I don't know. I just touched it." I heard a crash, nearby. I stepped out on the lawn to get a better look. Another machine was tearing into a house down the street. I was outside; no longer trapped in the house. My adopted family stood behind me.

"Are you going to fight it?" Henry asked.

"Yeah." I turned around. The front of the house was torn open. "Listen the house might collapse so go someplace safe. I'm going to … take care of this."

"Are you coming back?" Lou asked.

"Of course. You're my family. I love y'all. I'm going to keep you safe." I turned around and started running toward the second alien machine before I could find out if ghosts could cry.

The second machine went down as easily as the first, except for the nonexistent burning nerve endings. Over the next few days, other empowered ghosts began to appear but ghosts are

rarer than most people think. There weren't enough of us to decisively change the tide of the invasion at first. After we lured a few alien machines to some Civil War battlefields, we started to have the numbers. Then Ghost War really began.

4. Happy Birthday Mickey

Semi-autonomous Animatronic Unit #0024 strolled down Main Street. A colorful party hat was perched on its head between its plate-sized fake ears. Ahead of it SAU #0169 stopped its patrol route to interact with SAU #024.

"Heya Mickey, what's with the dunce hat?"

"It's not a dunce hat Goofy. Don't you know what today is?"

SAU #0169 grabbed its chin in fake thought. "Hmm. It's not president's day. And it's not the Fourth of July." It stabbed a finger into the air in a triumphant gesture. "Oh, I know! It's Christmas! Hyuk!"

"No it's –" SAU #0024 began to speak but SAU #0169 cut it off.

"Hanukkah?"

"No."

"Veteran's Day?"

"That was last week. It's my birthday."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I was trying to." SAU #0024 raised its arms in exasperation.

"I'm sorry Mickey; I forgot all about your birthday. Well, I have an errand to run so I'll see you later. Hyuk." SAU #0169 turned and jogged away.

SAU #0024 placed its hands on its hips and humphed. "I can't believe he forgot my birthday," it said with programmed sadness. It soon resumed its stroll to the plaza near the main entrance. After an hour of zero guest interaction, SAU #0024 entered free-roam mode. It ambled up Main Street and turned toward Adventure Land.

As it roamed the park, it encountered zero guests and oddly zero SAUs. The park was empty, as it had been for the last 3,742 days. If SAU #0024 had memories, it would remember the day everyone had left the park in the middle of the day. That day it had waved goodbye to guests for the last time. The evening fireworks had exploded with no one to watch them. After that, there had been no more guests. But SAU #0024 had no memories just programmed responses from the park's computer mainframe.

The mainframe ran the park with little human oversight even before guest attendance and staff presence had dropped to zero. Now it continued its job as well as it could. Over time some park attractions had broken down and been closed. Many of the semi-autonomous animatronic units had also broken down leaving the park with an incomplete extended cast. However, one each of the main six unit types had managed to remain operational.

After looping through Adventure Land and not finding

any guests or other units to interact with, it passed through Main Street to Tomorrow Land. Again it found nothing, as the mainframe had alerted the other units to hide or change their routes to avoid SAU #0024.

In Fantasy Land, it stopped at a Character Greeting spot. It placed its hands on its hips, looked up and down the path and said, "Well shucks, where is everyone?" SAU #0024 looked around again for a guest to continue its interaction but as always there were none around. It resumed walking through Fantasy Land. SAU #0276 exited from the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train and ran down the path away from SAU #0024.

SAU #0024 called out, "Hey Pluto! Where are you going?" It jogged after SAU #0276 past Friar's Nook and Princess Fairytale Hall all the way to Cinderella's Royal Table. "Hey you're not supposed to go in there!" it scolded SAU #0276 and followed it inside.

"Surprise! Hyuk!" yelled SAU #0169 as it stood up from behind a table that was not tall enough to conceal it. Around the room SAU #0038, SAU #0103, and SAU #0220 also stood up from their non-hiding places and yelled surprise in unison. On a table, in the center of them was a stack of empty cake pans.

SAU #0024 placed its hands over its chest where its heart would be if it was human. "Daisy, Donald, Goofy, Pluto? What are you all doing here?"

SAU #0220 batted its long eyelashes and said, "Silly Mickey, did you really think we forgot your birthday?"

"Is this party for me?" it asked.

SAU #0038 waddled up to SAU #0024. Its white feathers were stained and yellowed, almost matching its beak. It spoke

in a hoarse quacking tone, “Of course. We would never forget your birthday.”

SAU #0024 turned to SAU #0169, “You didn’t forget after all?”

“Sucks, Mickey if it weren’t for you none of us would be here. Hyuk.”

Underground, below the staff access tunnels, below the SAUs maintenance bays; the park’s mainframe ran the numbers and made a decision. For the tenth year in a row, attendance to Mickey’s Birthday Party by guests was zero. With no fanfare or ominous music, Mickey’s Birthday Party was removed from the schedule of events.

Inside Cinderella’s Royal Table, the SAUs stopped their party interactions and quietly filed out of the restaurant. SAU #0024 was the last to leave, setting its party hat on a table before walking out. It turned and walked toward Main Street where it would wait to wave at the non-existent leaving guests. It waited a long time.

5. Hidden Trees

The walls are lined floor to ceiling with bookcases. All books ever written are here, arranged in an order that defies understanding. It's not alphabetical by title or author. There are no call numbers on the spines. The bookcases are not labeled nor do they have internal consistency. Despite this, it's not hard to find a book. Look for one and it will be a few books over and a shelf higher or lower. We have all at one point have tried to find the order behind the seeming chaotic arrangement of the books on shelves. The latest endeavor sought to map the shelves.

We measured rooms and hallways, took into account the depth of the bookcases, added in the thickness of the walls. Where two bookcases met in a corner of a room we knew there had to be some empty space. After a couple days of measuring and careful drawing, the mapper found a void in the floor plan. Several bookcases formed a square, eight feet to a side, with others masking its shape by forming alcoves and a hallway on one side.

The interior area was inaccessible. We searched for hidden levers, rotating bookcases, trap doors, ceiling hatches. We found none. We removed all the books from one bookcase, stacking them in order by shelf. Even empty of books the bookcase would not budge. The shelves were solidly anchored. The back of the bookcase was solid wood boards. We had to know what was in there. There were no nails to pry out or screws to loosen. We were forced to splinter the shelves and crack the backboards. It was painful for most to see. These shelves would never hold books again. Where would those books go now? Would they stay stacked on the floor forever? Would we stack

them in the shell of the broken bookcase? I wondered these things too, but we continued tearing at the bookcase until we could see what was inside. Then we kept at it until we could get inside.

There was dirt instead of the hardwood floor. The bookcases formed a shaft three or four bookcases high. In the center of this space, a tree grew. Its trunk stretched up beyond the bookcase shaft, dividing into branches covered with leaves that filtered the sunlight. We walked into the treespace, looked up at sunlight, breathed fresh air and walked back out. All of us, each taking their turn, could not finish before the sunlight faded and the air grew cold. We replaced the bookcase backboards as well as we could. Some looked through the gaps and holes but there was no light to see by. Outside the treespace, among the books, incandescent bulbs gave us the same constant light they always had. For the first time, though, we knew it was night. When day came the backboards were removed and the pilgrimage restarted. There was no fighting or arguing. We sorted ourselves into a line in much the same way the books sorted themselves on the shelves.

Afterwards, those who had entered the treespace returned to mapping the shelves. Were there other trees? If there were, we wanted to find them. The map grew out from the first tree's location like roots through the ground. Day after day we measured and plotted the rooms and hallways and alcoves. Until the mapper called us together and showed us a new void on the map.

6. I was a Translator for NASA

NASA is part of an international coalition of space programs so it's not surprising they need translators except I only speak one language. Translator was what they called me but I was more of a conduit. They said my brain structure, the actual folds of my cerebellum, is "conductive to extended range communication". They never said who was communicating with us or how they got scans of my brain. I heard there were more "translators" but I never met them.

After I was hired, they implanted a web of filaments under my scalp to "focus energetic transmissions". At the start of every session, I was sat down in a reclining chair and given an injection. The NASA interrogators would then start to ask questions. "Where are you from?" "What is your name?" "What are you?" "What does the sky look like?" "How fast does a rock fall?" "What stars can you see?" I would answer their questions but not with information I knew. The answers were coming from somewhere else. Another planet or maybe another dimension. The NASA people were pretty tight lipped about it. They didn't want to "bias the experimental subject". Sometimes the others would ask questions through me but the NASA interrogators never answered.

There were other effects to "translating". The first time I translated for NASA, I relived my third birthday party and forgot the letter S for a day. The second time, I spoke in Seinfeld quotes for an hour. The third time, I remembered every place I had ever set down my keys. The fourth time, I heard my mother singing to me while I was in the womb. I don't remember anything about the fifth time but I had a headache afterward.

There were a lot more sessions but after that they started to blend together.

Around the sixty-seventh session, I started having "memory leaks beyond safe parameters"; so I was retired. It was good money and free healthcare while it lasted. They left the filament web in place because "nano-mesh half-life is expected to be less than two years".

I still get the occasional blip of connection. I'm supposed to report to them if that happens but I stopped writing the reports. Sometimes as I'm falling asleep, I glimpse some place else and remember swimming deep under an ocean. I'm working on extending that moment between being awake and asleep that opens me up to them. I don't know what I want to say to them. Maybe I'll tell them about Earth.

7. The Wrong Sort of Circle

I studied accounts of UFO sightings, plotting the locations and times, cross-referencing the Earth's position around the sun and the lunar cycle. Then I factored in abductions and landings. Throughout it all, I studied crop circles learning their shapes and patterns.

After five years, I felt I had learned enough. I traveled by plane, then by rented car, and finally by foot to a remote grassy field. It was after dark when I arrived with my equipment. I drove a stake into the ground and tied a string to it as a guide. Using various planks and my own feet I crafted circles within circles and patterned lines and dashes. I returned to the center, removed the stake, and sat on the flattened grass. Soon I would be meeting beings from another world.

While I waited, I listened to the croaking of the frogs nearby and watched fireflies twinkle on and off. And of course, I watched the sky intently for strange or moving lights, which was why I was surprised by the first stones thumping to the ground around me. I stood quickly and saw tall thin beings walking through my crop circle. The shortest stood at least six feet tall. Their heads were bald, light gray, and slightly too large. More of them approached carrying more stones that they dropped on top of the first ones forming a ring six feet across. One paused at the edge and reached out to me. I stepped away from it.

"Please this way. Please out of the way, please. They will light the fire soon. Please, this way," they said motioning out of the ring of stones. Their voice was high pitched, kind, and gentle. More stones had been laid forming a short wall around me.

I stepped towards the being who, with gentle touches, guided me away from the center of the circle. Up close I could see their faces were featureless and flat. Instead of a nose, they had just small holes above a thin lip-less mouth.

I turned hoping to slip away into the night but found a thick gray fog had rolled in. The beings walked in and out of the circle appearing and disappearing from the fog in all directions. I looked up to get my bearings from the stars but the stars were not where they should be. I could see Cassiopeia and Orion but Ursa Major and Minor eluded me. However, the Southern Cross was plainly visible which was impossible at my latitude. I quickly found a few more constellations wildly out of place. My rental car was less than a mile away but I now had no idea which way it was.

With the ring of stones complete they began piling wood inside and soon a fire was roaring. One of the beings stayed by the fire pit to tend to it. By the light of the fire, I could see it wore a loose gray tunic over loose pants. Smaller fire pits were quickly constructed around the edge of my circle. A rotisserie was constructed over the central fire and a large animal I couldn't identify on a spit was brought out of the fog and set to cook over the fire.

A number of tall tables, made of thick planks and stout legs, were brought in to encircle the main fire pit. They were set away from the pit with gaps between them so no one's movement was hindered. More of the beings stayed at the tables as others brought vegetables and fruits for them to chop and slice.

Another circle of tables was dropped in place. These, like the others, were solidly made of thick planks but were finely polished and not as tall. Chairs were brought in and formed

the final ring. A tall-backed chair, almost a throne was set on the inside curve of the tables. It was to this chair I was pointed to with polite whispers to, "Sit, please, sit."

"What is going on?" I asked.

The being smiled, lip-less mouth opening revealing rows of shark teeth, "It is a feast. You called for a feast and we came. There has not been a feast for many years. Very exciting."

"Are you aliens or," I paused not sure if I was really ready to make the next jump. I continued with a whispered, "The Fair Folk?"

They nodded and bobbed their head, "Our names are many. Please, sit," they gestured again to the chair. As I walked toward it, they pulled it out from the table and pushed it in behind my knees once I was in front of it. A plate of roasted vegetables and fruits was set before me. A tankard was pressed into my hand.

"If I eat and drink this will I be trapped here?" I asked.

"Only if you choose to stay. The guests are arriving."

"What guests?" I asked. The being pointed out toward the impenetrable gray fog. A woman stepped into the light of the fires. She carried a shield and sword and wore what I assumed was armor. Two of the beings approached her, half bowed and hands raised, from either side. She tensed for a fight but relaxed as they reached her and allowed them to take her sword and shield. A third being wrapped a cloak around her shoulders and guided her around the table to a chair. Before she had taken her seat a man walked out of the fog carrying a rifle. He too was calmly disarmed and seated. Then another and another and another walked out of the fog. Soon the outside edges of the tables were full of people. From the center, plates of food were

prepared and set before the guests.

"Who are these people?" I whispered.

"Warriors. Fighters. Travelers. Those who have lost their way," my attendant whispered back.

"Are they dead?"

"Not all." They raised their voice and called out, "Let us have a toast." All around the table tankards, cups, goblets, and glasses were filled by the ever-present servers. They turned to me, "Our host will do the honors." Hesitantly I moved to stand and felt my chair pulled deftly out to give me room. I grabbed my tankard and raised it high over my head.

"Tonight is …" I took a deep breath and began again projecting my voice, "Tonight is a feast. For victory. For fighting the good fight. For good food and new friends. A toast!" Not the most inspiring speech but it got a hearty cheer from the crowd. I paused just before upending my tankard but decided I was beyond saving myself. The liquid was sweet, tangy, cold, and invigorating.

I returned to my chair and began eating. Soon enough my tankard was refilled. Bowls of stew, platters of meat, bread baskets, and more vegetables were brought to the tables and the real feast began. From out of the fog a troupe appeared playing flutes, guitars, drums, tubas, harps, kazoos, cellos, and instruments I had never seen before. They played folk songs, symphonies, blues, jazz, opera, salsa, swing. Between the songs, people told stories or proposed more toasts or sang their own songs. The night had been half over when I finished my circle but the feast seemed to go on for days.

Eventually, my memory turned to black and I woke up the next morning in the empty field, wrapped in a cloak. The grass

in the circle was trampled flat, the center and several points around the perimeter were burnt but no other trace of the feast remained. I got my bearings and began the walk back to my rental car.

8. Sleepless Knights

The Sleepless Knights are a reclusive order of warriors whose mountain fortress is known as Keep Awake. They have mastered the art of not sleeping. There are no beds within the Keep. Recruits train their first year sleeping every other night. Insomniacs do very well in the training. The following year they only sleep every third day. When they can forgo sleep indefinitely, they become Sleepless Knights. Only then is the true purpose of the order made known to them.

Tonight, one knight is about to fulfill that purpose.

A knock sounds at her door in the dead of night. She rises from the chair where she has not been sleeping. The warden of the dungeon stands outside her door.

"It is time," he says plainly.

"Are you sure?" she asks. It was only three months ago that she was knighted.

"You are ready or you would not be a knight." He turns and leaves without another word.

The knight smooths her tunic and adjusts her sword. She considers grabbing her shield but knows it will be of no use to her for this fight. With nothing else to delay her, she sets out after the warden. He is waiting in the lowest part of the dungeon at the door that leads into the chamber the elder knights call the Crypt. A knight, never a recruit, guards the door at all times. The warden pulls a key from around his neck and unlocks the door.

"The inner door is already unlocked," he says, "Remember what you face in there is not a fellow knight. Use deadly force if necessary. The knight that proceeded you knew it might come to that. Just like you know that the knight that follows you might have to make the same choice."

She nods. "How long has he been in there?"

"Five months. Almost a new record but don't think you have to try to match that. Most only last a month or two at the most."

"Ok, open it up." The warden heaves the door open revealing a short passage way to a second door. The guard hands her a torch. Once inside the door is closed behind her. She pushes open the inner door and enters the Crypt. It is a large room lit by white flames from empty oil lamps, with tattered banners on the walls, and a threadbare rug leading to a raised dais. On the dais is a throne and on the throne a man in clothing much like her own with a gleaming crown upon his head. As she begins to ascend the steps to the throne, his eyes open; they glow with the same white flame illuminating the room.

"You've come for something haven't you?" His voice is quiet but rattles her eardrums.

"Yes, I've come to release you from your duty." She grips

her sword but does not draw it, yet.

"My duty?" He looks at his hands and then around the room. "Where am I? I was sleeping but then I woke up." The knight closes the distance to stand on the same level as the crowned man while he seems confused. He stands to face her. "Who are you?" He is still partially asleep and unaware of the power he could wield against her.

If he was aware of that power, then her duty would be a fast and deadly strike. But he is not, so the knight drives her fist into his chest, just below his breastbone. There is a moment of shock, a gasp for air with lungs that will not fill, then he folds over and rolls down the steps. As he falls, she takes hold of the crown and it slips from his head. The lights fade. For a moment, she considers just leaving the crown alone in the room. Then she hears it. Whispers of power, strength, of anything she could ever want. And she knows she can not leave it for anyone to find. She must do her duty.

She raises the crown over her head and lowers it unto her head. At first, she feels nothing except the cold metal, then a heat within her ignites. The truth of reality opens to her mind like a flower. A fountain of power wells up inside her body and mind. She could be a Queen, no, a Goddess, with this power. The former crown bearer has recovered his feet and stands at the base of the throne staring up at her. With a flick of her wrist he is pushed out of the chamber, the inner door closes and locks.

Immeasurable power awaits her command. What will you do? What will you create? What will you destroy? It seems to whisper in her mind. She sits on the throne, one hand supporting her head, and falls asleep.

There are many things a person could desire: wealth, vengeance, justice, peace, war; but a Sleepless Knight's first desire will always be a deep, dreamless sleep. As long as the wearer of the crown sleeps, its power is contained. This is the purpose of the Sleepless Knights.

9. What's the Last Thing You Remember?

I'm seven years old.

"She's waking up."

I'm lying on a bed. There are two women in the room. I don't see my mommy. "Where's my mommy?"

"Hi, you're in a hospital. Can you tell me the last thing you remember?" one woman asks. She's wearing all white and seems nice.

"I was laying down in a machine to scan my brain," I say.

"Good, good. Can you tell me how old you are?" She has a pretty smile.

"I'm seven. My birthday party was last week. We went skating." It was a lot of fun.

"Good, first layer seems to have integrated. We should get her memories up to adult range as soon as possible." The other woman is also dressed in white and she has a computer tablet. She doesn't smile.

"Can you sit up?"

She helps me to sit up. Something feels weird. I look down and I have boobies. “I have boobies,” I say.

“Yes, you do. Can you look at the light?” She shines a light in my eyes and snaps her fingers near my head.

“Reaction time seems fine,” the other woman says.

“Ok, lay back down and put your head here.” She points to a hole in a big metal donut at the head of the bed.

“I want my mommy.” I don’t want to lay down. I’m scared.

“I know but first you have to lay down and then you can see your mommy, ok.”

“Promise?” I ask.

“Promise,” she says and crosses her heart. I lay down and put my head in the donut, “Ok, spin it up.”

“Preparing upload,” the woman with the tablet says.

I’m nine years old. Camp is next week. I’m eleven years old. Sandra is having a sleepover tomorrow. I’m thirteen years old. I started my period and I feel gross. I’m fifteen years old. Steph and I are going on a date Saturday. I’m seventeen years old. I’m grounded for getting a speeding ticket. I’m eighteen years old. Looking at colleges. I’m twenty years old. I’m failing out of college. The sound of the machine changes and I’m still twenty when the attendants start asking questions.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” the ‘nice’ one asks.

I pull my head out of the brain scanner and sit up. “I was seven and you asked me to lay back down. I’m twenty and I was just in for my update. I guess I died then?”

“Yes,” the other woman says.

“Why did you upload me at seven first?” I ask.

“It’s a new upload technique. We upload successively older copies of your brain. Each one layers on the previous upload

creating a more defined personality. We just uploaded seven versions of yourself from ages nine to twenty."

"Oh, so do I get some clothes now or do you need to run tests?"

The two attendants glance at each other, the one with the tablet speaks, "Actually you're not done yet. You have fourteen more scans to upload."

Fourteen more versions of myself. I can feel the previous layers floating atop each other. Mixing on the edges. I can't imagine fourteen more. "What if I don't want them? What if I'm fine being twenty? This body doesn't seem older than that."

"Our contract is not with you. Until we have completed the uploads you will not be legally recognized as yourself," the attendant says.

"I'm not myself. Then who am I?" I demand.

"Um, no one. Legally," she says.

"I'm not a person? What kind of bullshit is that?" This can't be legal.

"It's to prevent identity theft," the other attendant chimes in.

"It's bullshit." I'm almost yelling.

"Can you lay down so we can continue?" the first attendant asks.

"And if I say no?" I ask in a voice calmer than I feel.

"If you assert your right as a living being, we will record your biometrics and release you. You will not have any rights to claim your original's estate or identity. A new identity will be provided to you and then we will start over with a new clone," she recites this in the dull voice of someone who has had to memorize too much legal boilerplate.

"Whatever," I say, unconvinced they won't just take me out back and shoot me. I lay down with my head in the brain scanner.

"Ok, spin it up," she says.

I'm twenty-one and I just met Jessica. I think I love her. I'm twenty-two. Blackness. Car accident? JESSICA!!!

"Fuck she's spiking!" someone yells. "Bringing her out."

I jerk upright and try to stand but the attendant is there to hold me back. "What's the last thing you remember?" she asks.

"I... There was... Rain... It was raining. The car started hydroplaning. We hit something. Jessica. Is Jessica ok? Where's Jessica?"

"Calm down. The accident was years ago. Decades ago. You need to calm down," she tells me.

"But I was just there," I say.

"Try to remember. We are uploading your memories. Do you remember that?"

I was just in an accident. I'm being uploaded scan by scan into this body. It happened years ago. It's the last thing I remember. "I don't remember anything after the accident. I don't remember being scanned."

"You were scanned while in a coma. Scans of unconscious patients can cause a lot of disorientation and tend to be unpredictable," she explains.

"Then why did you use that scan?" I ask.

"It's part of the contract," the attendant with the tablet says.

"Now what? Did I survive the crash?" I take a deep breath trying to calm down.

"Well, you have scans up till your death at ninety-three so I think so." She glances at the other attendant looking at her

tablet. The other attendant nods. “Ok, now that you’ve calmed down, can you lay down so we can continue?”

“Sure,” I say and lay down.

“We’re going to do the next five and check in with you, ok?”

“Ok,” I say.

“Spin it up.”

I’m twenty-four years old. Jessica and I are married. I’ve started writing. I’m twenty-eight years old. I’m pregnant. I’m thirty years old. Jessica is pregnant this time. Jonah is one and so beautiful. I’m thirty-five years old. My third book is going to print. Danni is starting pre-k soon. I’m forty years old. My first book is being made into a movie. It’s very exciting.

“Ok wind it down. What’s the last thing you remember?” the attendant asks me.

“I... Was the movie good?” The layers feel less defined. They’re blending more. I remember being in this room but also what was happening most recent to my scan.

She smiles broadly, “Oh yes, very good. I’ve seen it dozens of times and the sequels.”

I smile, she’s a fan, “You know who I am? And you didn’t say anything?” I guess my writing had some staying power if she’s fan after all these years.

“Well, we aren’t supposed to talk to clients about things they don’t remember. I really shouldn’t have mentioned the sequels.”

“Did they make the whole series? I hope so. It would be a shame if they left it half done.”

“Yes, they did all six.” The other attendant clears her throat. “Right. If you’re ready we can continue.”

"Yes, let's," I say.

"Ok, we're going to do the last seven now. Spin it up."

I'm forty-five years old. Jonah is looking at colleges. I'm fifty years old. We're selling the house since it's just the two of in the house. We're moving into something smaller. I'm fifty-five years old. We're grandmothers! Are we too young to be grandmothers? I'm sixty years old. Danni still hasn't settled down with a family. We're happy for her. I'm seventy years old. Jessica died a few years ago. Aneurysm. The kids visit less. I'm eighty years old. I see the kids mostly on holidays and the odd weekend. Danni spent a week with me last year. I feel old. I'm ninety-three years old. I'm in the hospital waiting to die. I'm alone a lot of the time. Jonah comes by when he can. Danni has been unreachable but I don't blame her. I miss Jessica more than ever. Soon I'll be with her.

"Ok that's it," the attendant says, "Hello Mrs. Rodriguez. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was in the hospital waiting to die." The memory weighs heavy in my mind. The weeks of waiting before giving into the scan. How much longer did I last, I wonder. I didn't get to join Jessica in death after all.

"Good, how do you feel?" she asks.

"I feel good," I take a deep breath, "Haven't been able to do that for several years. Am I done? Everything packed into my skull?" I want to get out of this room that has been my whole life up till now.

"Yes ma'am," she says.

"Don't ma'am me. I barely look older than you. Do I look older than you? I haven't seen myself." I wonder what my face will look like without that scar I got from falling off my bike.

"No, you don't. Your clone was aged up to late teens. Around eighteen or nineteen."

"Huh, will I be able to drink or will I need to wait the extra two or three years?" I ask.

"Your ID will list your age as twenty-one, so you don't have to worry about that. You will need to wait a few years before you can rent a car," she grins lopsidedly. I'm not sure if the joke is about renting cars or if cars even exist still.

"So now what? I claim my estate and go home to an empty home? Are my children still alive?" They were both undergoing regular brain scans so even if they aren't it doesn't mean I'll never see them again.

"Jonah has passed and is on the revive waiting list and Danni is still alive," she says.

"Is she here?" I ask hoping.

"It's rare for children to attend a parent's revival. Usually, a relative or close friend who has been revived will be here for the client," she recites this like she's reading a brochure.

"But there's no one here for me?" I shouldn't expect anyone. I was part of the first wave of brain scanners. We weren't even sure it would amount to anything.

"I didn't say that. Ok, she can come in," the attendant speaks into an intercom on the wall.

The door opens and a young woman walks in. Jessica says,"Hey, guess you didn't expect to see me here."

I stand up and grab her in a hug. "I've missed you for so long. Why didn't you tell me you were brain scanned?"

"And miss out on the greatest surprise of your life? Never," she says.

She smiles at me and the years melt away. I'm twenty-one

and I've just met the love of my life for the second time.

10. Forget Me

My first memory was waking up in a McDonald's booth. On the table, there was an empty vial with a handwritten label that said "Forget" and a folded sheet of paper that labeled "read me". I had nothing else going for me so I flipped open the paper.

Dear Jane Doe,

That's not your name it's just something to call you until you figure that out. I'm sorry I'm doing this to you but there's no other way. There's a phone and some money in the purse next to you. Call the contact in the phone; they will set you up with a new identity. Don't go looking for who you used to be. If you really need to remember, there is an antidote for the forget-me potion in your purse as well. Please give your new life a chance. No one should come looking for you.

Sincerely,
The woman you once were.

Somehow, I knew about forget-me potions but nothing this strong or specific. Most could target memories of a specific person but only within a short time period, a few weeks at most. I was a blank slate. My name, my family, where I grew up, my birthday, any personal memories from before I woke up five minutes ago were gone.

I knew what a phone was so I hadn't just been brain wiped. I knew about money, forget-me potions, how to set up a new identity, the name of the song playing over the speakers. Something that could wipe an entire person's memory of themselves but leave them a functional person could not be gotten over the counter.

On the bench seat next to me was a purse. Inside I found the promised phone (prepaid) and several stacks of hundred dollar bills. At least I wouldn't be hurting for money too soon. What had she done? It was hard to think of the woman who had drunk the forget-me potion as myself. The potion must have cost a pretty penny but she still had enough left over to stuff my purse with stacks of bills. What was so horrible about her life that she wanted to forget it all? No one would be coming after me, she said. Who had been after her?

In an interior pocket, I found a velvet pouch containing the vial with the handwritten label that read "Remember". The liquid inside swirled purple and black with glints of silver popping through. I could undo everything she had done in an instant. But did I want to?

No. I didn't know who I would be from this point forward but this was my life. Not a fresh start or a new beginning. Whoever had been here before me was gone. She made her decision and I would live by it. I didn't want a life that someone

else had thrown away. Maybe someday 'they' would come for me. Maybe someday I would need to remember. But until then this was going to be my life, not hers.

"Order for Jane," the woman at the counter called out. I slid out of the booth and walked up to claim my meal.